

August 1, 2010
Lectionary 18c
Luke 12:13-21
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

STUFFED

Sometimes we say it: *I'm stuffed. I couldn't eat another bite. There is no more room.* Unfortunately, we don't take the advice of some cultures that say you should eat until you are only 80% full.

Stuffed. That's the way most of our lives are. More of us are overweight than under. Most of us have more stuff than we know what to do with. And most of our schedules are crammed full as well.

Stuffed. Our lives are stuffed. Maybe "excess" is another way to say it.

The ironic thing is this: we still want more. More stuff. More money. More of everything. We're wired that way. It's the American dream. It's what we hear in advertising. It's how the Jones' live next door.

But our "bigger-is-better, I-want-it-now, I-really-need-that" lifestyles are beginning to show grave danger signs. Mental health professionals are even seeing the signs in kids. Many are out of sync. They can't pay attention. They can't control their anger. They can't moderate their pain. Sure, some is genetic. But according to a director of an institute for neuroscience and human behavior, many of the problems come from living in a culture of excess.

Valuing stuff above people isn't a new problem. Instead of coming to Jesus with the spiritual issues of loss, grief or mortality; the man in today's gospel is squabbling over inheritance issues. You've heard how people can go bonkers when the family will is read! Jesus doesn't beat around the bush. He knows human nature. Beware of greed, he says. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Fair enough. Yet Christianity *is* a religion that values the material. Colossians may tell us to set our minds on things above, rather than on things on earth. But at the same time we are called to love and care for the earth, to treasure our bodies, to live sacramental lives--that is, to find the spiritual in the stuff of nature and everyday life. Maybe the question is what kind of stuff? Where do we find our ultimate meaning? In iPods and smart phones? In cool cars and larger houses? Or in human relationships and things that have enduring value?

Make no mistake. It is prudent to plan for the future. We should all have a will and other end-of-life directives, whatever our age. And hopefully it includes a portion for charity, the Church, or other valued institutions. Some of us have met with financial planners. We want to be wise with our investments. We want to prepare for retirement. We hope that insurance policies will give us some peace of mind when we face the changes and chances of life.

So why then does Jesus call the prosperous man in our gospel a fool? It doesn't say that he was greedy. He simply needs more barns for his bumper crops. The economy has been good to him. What's wrong with that?

Maybe the pronouns are a clue. Listen for the trinity of *me*, *myself* and *I* in the man's soliloquy. "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store my crops. *I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grains and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, 'Soul you have saved for the future. Relax, eat, drink and be merry.'"

But life can be cut short at any time. A country-music song by George Strait puts it this way:

You don't bring nothing with you here

And you can't take nothing back.

I ain't never seen a hearse, with a luggage rack.

An article by Judith Warner, called “Dysregulation Nation,” states that our economic problems in the past decade weren’t just because external controls went awry. We have “inner” self-regulation problems. Our control and restraint settings are out of whack. Or perhaps we don’t have any! In normal circumstances we would be aware of the consequences of eating too much or spending too much. But after decades of extreme affluence, a growing sense of entitlement, and instant gratification, our self-regulatory systems have come unwired. We’ve been living an orgy of self-indulgence said one author in a book called: *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*.

And here’s the thing. We are filled. Stuffed. Insatiable. And yet at the same time we are empty. Sometimes bored. Sometimes wondering what it’s all for. What it all means. We can resonate with the Teacher in Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” All our busy-ness. All our deeds. All our work. All our striving. It’s like chasing the wind.

And it can leave us ... empty.

How can we be so stuffed and so empty at the same time?

But maybe that is the beginning of wisdom. To know our hunger and our need. To come to this place, eager to learn the ways of Jesus who in his living and dying was rich toward God. We come to discover what is of lasting value, what is of true worth. We come hungry for the spiritual food that will satisfy our deepest longings.

We are stuffed. And we have more stuff that we can deal with. But in our liturgy it doesn’t mean a thing. We gather around the treasures of word and sacrament. The treasure of community and the gifts that the poor and needy give to *us*. The treasure of open, empty hands. The treasure of letting go, and learning gratitude and generosity. The treasure of the present moment, the only moment we ever have.

In baptism, we have died with Christ. Christ is our life, and our life is revealed in him. Come to the table. Leave your stuff behind. Leave your worries behind. Leave the striving behind. Leave the future behind.

Here we treasure the emptiness and the silence. Here we wait for God to fill what we try to cram with more and more stuff. Gathered in community, we learn again and again that it’s not just about me. We are in this together: this church, this city, this world. God’s world. And there is more than enough for all the hungry ones and all the restless ones of our world.

God’s riches. God’s mercy. God’s grace. What if we could stuff ourselves with that lavish excess?